

When All Else Fails

Story: When All Else Fails

Storylink: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/891849/1/>

Category: Golden Sun

Genre: Adventure/Fantasy

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Authorlink: <https://www.fanfiction.net/u/246564/>

Last updated: 05/15/2003

Words: 1 71 33

Rating: K

Status: In Progress

Content: Chapter 1 to 7 of 7 chapters

Source: FanFiction.net

Summary: [pre-Lost Age AU]The Golden Sun crew have found land at last. But this is only the beginning.. *UPDATE* Chapter 7: Divided, is up.

***Chapter 1*: Land**

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The great bow of the Lemurian ship thudded into the soft sand.

"Isaac! I think we hit something! I swear I couldn't see it coming," Gareth called over the steering wheel. He bent down to grab his Burning Axe, which had tipped over from the impact and was starting to singe the heavy wood. Reminding himself to look for its' cover, Gareth ran down the stairs to the left and started sprinting down the deck. He was going at full speed, yet it still took about two minutes to reach the far end of the ship.

Grasping the rail, Gareth leaned out over the side, hoping he wouldn't find a gaping hole in the side of the ship. It would be just his luck to run into a jagged rock on his shift. But he didn't find a hole, or a rock. The surface of the water shimmered metres below him, over what was unmistakably a sandy bottom. In shock, Gareth looked up from the ground to see what was in front of him.

Barely fifty paces away lay a stretch of pure white sand. Behind that, some scrubby bushes and stunted trees covered a wide expanse of ground. Gareth could distantly see the outline of a dense forest further into the horizon, and almost thought he could make out some mountains. Shifting his gaze to the left a bit, he saw that the beach ran on as far

as he could see, almost painfully bright in the late afternoon sunlight.

Hardly noticing his mouth had dropped open, Gareth stared at the land in front of him. It was almost too much to believe that, after two months of being confined to a ship, searching for some hint of land, that he'd accidentally landed on it. He'd almost forgotten what trees looked like.

Finally grasping his senses, Gareth called frantically down the long deck of the ship.

"Isaac! Mia, Ivan! Come here, quick! You've got to see this!" Not waiting for them to answer or appear, Gareth quickly snatched up a coil of rope and tied it to the wooden railing of the ship. Grabbing the other end, he wrapped it twice around his waist, checked that it wouldn't break, and started to lower himself down to the water. Gareth was too impatient to put down the proper plank. This warranted immediate attention, not fussing around with gears and pulleys.

He was halfway down the side of the Lemurian vessel when an exasperated voice called out. "Gareth, if you've hit another coral reef, I'll have to wrap that belt of yours around your . . . " Suddenly Mia's voice went quiet. Gareth grinned to himself, knowing that she would be just as shocked as he had been.

"Dear God . . . Gareth! Have you seen this?"

"Well of course I have, Mia! I ran into it after all,"

"You should look where you're going then!"

"Oh, I'm sorry Mia! Next time, I'll not run into a continent, how's that?"

Mia's voice had lost its agitated edge. "I don't really mind if you run into land, Gareth." Gareth sighed, and continued lowering himself down. He and Mia always seemed to have arguments, over the pettiest of things. Most of the time Gareth knew he was in the right, but it didn't help that she felt the same way. He knew that Mia was much smarter than he was, but he didn't like to think that gave her an advantage over him. In some of their most heated rows, Ivan or Isaac would have to step in to put a stop to it. Gareth equated their fights with the long time spent at sea with only each other for company, but Ivan had suggested once that they were "at elemental odds".

He knew that Ivan's idea was more probable. He being a Mars Adept, it was only natural that Mia, a Mercury Adept, would have conflicting opinions. It was most pronounced when they fought. Mia used her skills to slowly wear down her opponent, and healed the others in the process. With Gareth, he much preferred a frontal assault, with the biggest attack he could muster at the time. Recuperation from these attacks was to simply give the enemy a taste of his axe. But both he and Mia knew that they didn't hate each other; friends had fights at the best of times.

"Goodness, Gareth, in a hurry?" Mia called down, as she peered over the edge. She wore an amused expression that barely hid her excitement at being able to walk on dry land again.

"I'm not spending a second longer than I have to on that infernal raft. Where are Ivan and Isaac?"

"They should be coming soon, they were checking the storage hull for leaks. Oh look, here they are now,"

Garet heard two pairs of running footsteps pound closer, then stop abruptly at the edge. Gasping for breath, Ivan joined Mia over the railing.

"Gosh . . . Garet . . . you didn't have . . . to slam the ship . . . into the ground . . ."

"You are all so *picky*! I cannot help it if I didn't learn how to sail Lemurian ships back home," Shouted Garet, halting his decent to glare up at his assembled friends. "And I don't hear *Isaac* complaining about the stupid ship!"

Isaac sounded a little put out. "You hadn't gotten to me yet, Garet . . ."

Forgetting he was dangling from a rope, Garet threw his hands up in despair, and promptly crashed into the very close shoreline. Spitting out salty water, Garet got to his feet. He looked up, where he could just make out 3 concerned faces.

"Fine then!" He cried out. "I hereby will not sail this ship any more!" Garet turned on his heel and marched towards the shore, creating his own small waves in his wake.

Ivan shot a look at Mia, then Isaac. He grinned. "I'm quite happy with that, aren't you?"

24/04/03 – Fixed some errors.

***Chapter 2*: Shore**

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Reaching dry land at last, Gareth reached down and ripped off a boot. Tipping it upside down, water poured out of it. He grimaced. Sometimes running headlong into things had its drawbacks. Or, running through water. He put his boot back on and turned to watch the others lowering the plank. Sort of.

"Isaac! No, grab the *other* rope!" cried Ivan as the large wooden plank keeled over to one side. Isaac let go of a rope and snatched another, hauling at it to right the plank. Both he and Ivan started running the ropes out, and the plank finally continued lowering towards the shore. Mia stood behind them with her arms crossed. Gareth couldn't hear what she was saying, but he was sure it wasn't praise.

When the wood thudded into the edge of shoreline, Gareth strolled over to them, holding his arms behind his back.

"Was that fun?" he called out good-naturedly.

"Oh be quiet," huffed Mia, coming down the plank. "It was better than your way, we aren't all wet." Coming to the bottom, she turned to Gareth and pointed a finger at his face. "And you didn't even try to help!"

Gareth looked pained. "How can you say that? You always tell me I mess things up. So I stayed right out of your way this

time."

"You -"

"Ah ah! I'm not listening!" Gareth clapped his hands over his ears. Mia scowled at him. Thankfully, their conversation was stopped in its tracks when Ivan approached.

"Come on guys, enough. Go and . . . stand at different ends of the beach or something." He tugged his cloak around into the right spot, and then gazed at the beach. "Don't ruin our landing with nasty comments." Gareth's annoyance faded. Ivan was right. There was no point in arguing now; they had no reason to be. Here was land, and he fully intended to explore it. He looked to Isaac, who'd just come down the ramp.

"Are we going to check it out? See what's here?" He asked Isaac. His childhood friend regarded him for a moment, and then stared across the land. Gareth could tell when Isaac was making decisions. He tended to take a while to make up his mind, and would rarely come to an answer without all the information. Isaac had never wanted to be the leader of the group, but it was a responsibility he'd accepted nonetheless.

"Well," Isaac said at last, calling the groups' attention to him unwittingly. He faltered, and then continued. "I don't think we should just charge off into the wilds. And it's nearly sundown." Gareth fidgeted with a strap on his axe. He hated waiting, but he wasn't going to be rude. Mia had called him insensitive and brash enough times. Isaac looked at Gareth pointedly. "I think we should stay on the ship until tomorrow."

Mia nodded. "That would be safer. We don't know what sort of things come out at night here."

"Yeah... We can go check for firewood though. There's still at least an hour before the sun sets." Ivan said, glancing at Gareth. Gareth would have to thank Ivan for that. Ivan knew how much he wanted to get away from the ship, and was giving him a valid reason to do so. Gareth grinned at him, and Ivan smiled back.

"I'll do that now, if you like."

"Ok, but Gareth," Isaac said loudly, as Gareth had already started to leave. His eyes burned into him. "Be back before sunset. You aren't going off for a few battles by yourself. If you end up getting hurt we wouldn't know where you were."

Gareth tried to sound reassuring. "I'm not going to, Isaac. Look, I'll just chop the trees near the shore. I won't go out of your sight. Promise." Unable to contain himself any longer, he sprinted down the beach towards the scrubby land behind the sand.

Slowing down, Gareth started looking around the ground. It sure was desolate here. His boots scuffed over dried out grass, making dismal rustling sounds. Sighing, he swept the horizon with his eyes. Not a single tree within a hundred spans. Normally he'd have just kept going till he found some, but Gareth wasn't willing to go against Isaac's wishes.

Not watching where he was going, Gareth's feet smacked into the very thing he was looking for: a huge fallen log. Hopping on one foot in aggravation, Gareth couldn't help but wonder why he was always running into things. Perhaps his five senses weren't good enough, and that wasn't even counting Psynergy. Although, he thought grudgingly, as he unhooked his axe, maybe Mia had it right.

Perhaps he just didn't look where he was going.

24/04/03 - Fixed some errors.

***Chapter 3*: Plans**

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Watching Garet laying into the fallen tree was almost as exhausting as doing it, Ivan thought. He couldn't imagine having such passion for hacking things. It went against his moral fibre. He'd always tried to sort things out reasonably with people, using logic. Even subtle manipulation, he admitted to himself. It was only since meeting Isaac and Garet that he'd had to fight for his very life.

Ivan wondered how he would have handled a swordfight had he not joined with his friends. Quite possibly he would have been cleaved in two before he'd even thought about attacking. Either that, or he wouldn't have been in that situation in the first place. Fighting hadn't had a part in his life as a servant. Of course, Lord Hammet's guards had gotten into scuffles with brigands on occasion, but Ivan had only witnessed these. He smiled absently to himself. How shocked would those guards have been to see him now, hacking limbs off wild wolves?

He scuffed his shoes around in the sand. Strange as Ivan's circumstances were, he felt no remorse at being on this quest. Few people could ever do something as righteous as this. He felt a deep sense of pride to know he was helping, however insignificant that help may be. Garet often made a point of reminding Ivan that without him, they would surely be stuck outside many a door.

Turning away from the Mars adepts' steady chopping, Ivan called out to Mia, up on the deck of the ship. "Should we do a stocktake of our supplies? Weapons, food, spare clothes, the like?"

Mia halted her check of the anchor ropes, and called back down to him that that would be a good idea. Beside her, Isaac nodded in agreement.

Pulling his green cloak back over his shoulders, Ivan started back up the ramp. Passing Isaac at the top, he couldn't help thinking that the Venus adept was still a bit of an enigma to him. In the time that he'd known Isaac, he'd found him to be quite resourceful and intelligent. But Isaac never said much at all. Ivan had been a bit mystified by his behaviour at first, over time coming to accept his silence as part of his personality. But Gareth had often said that Isaac used to speak a whole lot more, when they were younger.

Crossing to the hold, Ivan unhooked the ladder. It banged to the dark floor below. He stepped onto the first rung, still lost in thought. He hadn't quite been able to find a valid reason for Isaac's silence. Some people he knew were quiet because they were agonisingly shy. Others were quiet because they hated townspeople, and thought they were full of useless banter. But Isaac . . .

Ivan jumped the last few rungs and landed with a thump on the ground. Picking up a lantern from the side, he went down the left passage, towards the hold. Passing the small kitchen, two bedrooms, and a pantry, he turned right at the intersection. It still amazed Ivan slightly just how big this Lemurian ship was. In theory, it could hold a veritable army of people.

Three more turns through the maze of passages, and Ivan reached the hold. It was a massive open space, easily taking up a third of the vessel's size. When they had first come aboard the ship, they had found a few scattered goods in the hold. Blankets, ceramic food jars, a couple of gauntlets and an old, blunt spear were the only reminders that the ship had had previous occupants. They'd taken the blankets and jars gratefully, but the spear and gauntlets weren't of much use to them. Their own equipment was in far better condition. But Ivan had noticed, on one of his frequent trips into the hold, that someone had been sharpening the spear.

He hadn't considered asking whom. It was their own business what his companions did to pass the time.

Crossing the worn wooden planks to the small pile of their own supplies, Ivan whipped out a sheaf of parchment and a quill. Time for work.

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"Okay," said Ivan, as he slipped into his chair at the scrubbed wooden table, "I took the stocktake on our items, and compiled a list of our gear.

"We have four containers of dried meat, six oranges, three jars of waybread, five packets of grain, two packets of beans, and a basket of vegetables. Out of the travelling supplies, there are six blankets and three padded blankets for sleeping on. We have two spare cloaks, one medium size and one large. Three packs, two coils of rope, seven flints, four water skins, and . . . *one* spare boot."

Ivan glanced up at Garet. "It seems to be your spare boot. Where's the other one?"

Garet cleared his throat and looked sheepish. "I was having target practise in the hold, and I missed my mark..." Mia looked incredulous.

"You were hurling your axe across the hold?"

"No," Garet averted his eyes, "I was practising with my Psynergy..."

"What!" Garet winced at the shout.

"I didn't burn anything else... I didn't do it again after I destroyed my boot..."

"You shouldn't have done it in the first place! Honestly, use some common sense, Garet." Sensing another heated argument brewing, Ivan cleared his throat.

"Um, as I was saying. We have one spare boot. As for our weapons, we each have our main swords, axes, staffs and assorted things. Then we have seven knives, two daggers, and one arrow. I don't know why we have an arrow and not a bow, but I suppose it could be useful. Armour. Five sets of chest armour, four sets of leg armour, three shields, and two helms. We've lost a few over time, and some got lost during that big storm. Besides that, there's the personal gear we wear, and our separate scabbards, baldrics and waist pouches.

"Judging by what we've got, we can travel for about a week, on strict rations, on our supplies alone. Of course, we can always snare rabbits and pick vegetables and fruit along the way. Since this land looks pretty large, I think it's a good bet that there would be at least *one* village somewhere. We can get food and other supplies from there." Finished with his analysis, Ivan took a breath and leaned back in his chair. Isaac sat opposite him, brow furrowed with thought. Garet

was chewing on his gloves, and Mia was counting on her fingers, determining something he couldn't fathom. She looked up at last.

"I did my own stocktake of sorts, for our medical equipment," she said, crossing her hands on the table. "We've still got about thirteen herbs, but those don't help much anymore. There's a good amount of elixir and poison antidotes, and we've got one reviving draught. I'm afraid we used up the rest whilst back on land."

"But that's not really a big issue," said Gareth, removing his leather glove from his teeth. "You can heal any wounds we get, and even revive us, if it ever comes to that." Mia glanced up at him.

"Yes, there is that. But I'm not so proficient at diseases or illness. When I cured those at home I generally used mixtures. I left rather in a hurry, and didn't think to take any with me." Isaac's quiet voice came across the table.

"What about Psynergy afflictions?"

"Well," Mia sighed, tracing her finger around a groove in the wood, "I can generally cure poison, paralysis and sleep Psynergies. It's curses that I find difficult. I'm no exorcist."

"That's fine. We don't get many curses."

"But I do need to have a fair amount of Psynergy to cure a Psynergy ailment. It's a complex process, involving locating and dissipating the harmful Psynergy. It takes a lot out of me. So if I've used my power to fight a battle, it'll be harder for me to manage."

Ivan turned to Gareth. "What do you think of the terrain?" Gareth rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"It's pretty flat land around here. The scrubland goes on for a fair distance, about a thousand spans. After that, it looks like there are some dense forest areas. Beyond that, there are mountain ranges, but those are pretty distant. I don't think we have to worry about hard trekking for a few days, at least."

Gareth fell silent, as everyone thought his or her various thoughts. Ivan suddenly realised what none of them had asked.

"Do we even know where this is?" Everyone looked up. "I mean, is this land Idejima, or Lemuria? Or is it somewhere we've never even heard of? We could run smack into the Fire Clan, or Felix for all we know."

Isaac frowned. "That's true." Gareth shifted on his chair, attempting to find a comfortable spot.

"But we can't know," Gareth said, "We've only just barely set foot here. Until we find some people, or a landmark, we can't possibly guess." His face took on a frustrated look. "We're completely in the dark."

"I think the best thing to do is wait until morning, then set out," Mia murmured, brushing some dust off her dress. "We can make towards the centre of the island. If I know people, that's where they would be. At the heart of things. There would have to be at least a temple or religious structure near the middle. People tend to view themselves as the centre of existence quite often."

"Ok then," Isaac said, "We set out towards the centre tomorrow. We take our supplies with us . . . and we can leave

the Djinni here, to guard the ship. It's so big, it's bound to draw attention. All twenty-eight of our Djinni should be able to handle the job between themselves. Everyone, off to bed now."

A sudden din of scraping chairs echoed around the sitting room. Grabbing his supply list, Ivan couldn't help muttering, "Here we go again . . ."

24/04/03 - Fixed some errors.

***Chapter 4*: Light**

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A dull thump woke him up. Opening his eyes, Isaac was greeted with a view of the ceiling in his little room. He didn't get up; just lay there listening to the sounds around him.

Another thump, and judging from its softness, Isaac knew it must have come from Ivan's room. His was the room closer to the front of ship, whilst Isaac's room was near the hold. Because the Lemurian ship was so large, there had been multiple rooms to choose from, and no one had needed to bunk up. He was privately relieved by this, having slept near Garet in the past. The snoring had been unbelievable.

He twisted his head to look out the small porthole near the top of the wall. Muted pink light was filtering through. Beyond it, the clouds were stained red with the promise of sunrise. There was no other moment quite like sunrise, Isaac thought.

Sighing, he kicked the blankets from around his legs and dropped them to the unadorned floor. Swinging his legs around, Isaac stood and stretched out. It was difficult to do, seeing as the room was so small. He could almost touch both walls if he threw his arms out.

Squatting down, Isaac pulled open the small trunk next to his bed. He took out almost everything in there, which wasn't an awful lot. Besides his clothes and weapons,

he had only a small book and gilded amulet with him. The book had been a gift from his mother on his seventeenth birthday. It was quite unremarkable, a brown leather bound book, but Isaac was attached to it. Besides the fact that it was the only thing he had from his mother, the book detailed various sword techniques. Before he'd come on this journey, he'd had an interest in sword fighting, and had mock-battles with Gareth.

Isaac idly flipped through the pages. He'd memorised the whole book from start to finish. It had become all the more important to him since he'd needed to fight people who actually intended to kill him. He dropped the book into his bag, then picked up the amulet.

He'd found it in the woods a few years ago, sitting upon a rock. Like it was waiting for the next person to come along and claim it as their own. Isaac remembered how the sunlight had shined on it, sparkling with silver light. He'd snatched it up, and never went anywhere without it from that day forward. Few people knew he had it, besides his mother and Gareth.

The amulet itself didn't appear to be anything special. It was round, and fit easily into the palm of his hand. There was a raised edge around it, encircling the middle design: a vine twisted around a sword. The whole thing was covered in hammered silver leaf, which Isaac polished quite often, seeing as he got bored on the road.

Isaac didn't know why he kept the amulet; it was just a trinket he'd found. But he guessed it was the same as the book. They were his only things from home, his only reminder of the way he had been long ago.

He stuffed the amulet in his pocket, and grabbed his sword and scabbard from the bottom of the chest. He clipped it around his shoulder, then swung it around to his back. Falling back onto the bed, he pulled on his worn leather travel boots. He reached over the side to grab his armoured vest off the end of the bed. While he tied it together, he gazed around the room again. It couldn't really even be called a room: it was more of a storage cupboard with a bed thrown in as an afterthought. His friends had been a little perturbed when he'd chosen this room, seeing as it was so small. Isaac wondered if they hated the fact he didn't explain why. He hadn't felt comfortable with explaining his choice. He never did.

Hauling his travel pack up, Isaac had almost gotten out the door before he remembered his scarf. He turned back and snatched up the long yellow material, tying it around his neck in his usual fashion. Ivan had once said it could almost be a cloak. Almost.

Finally ready, Isaac pulled the door shut. He set off down the narrow corridor, his footsteps echoing around the walls. His room was down a much-unused corridor, presumably for extra rooms if there were too many people in the main residential areas. There were a couple of small rooms much like his own, a pantry and sitting room, but little else. It was deep in the bowels of the vessel, so it took a while to get down there, once you could find it through the mazes of passages up above. Isaac could understand why his friends may find it odd that he wanted to be so far away from the rest of the ship. They probably thought he was introverted. That wasn't the case.

They wouldn't understand.

Isaac jumped up the stairs two at a time, to collide with Gareth at the top. Gareth snorted with annoyance as the heap of things in his arms fell to the ground. He raked his hands through his rust-coloured hair.

"Argh! Nothing is going right today. Watch where you're going Isaac!" he muttered as he dropped to his knees and started grabbing all his things. Isaac frowned at him.

"Garet, I *was* watching where I was going. Perhaps it may have been *you* who wasn't?"

"Nonsense," Gareth dropped a handful of odd bits of metal back into a case, "I know perfectly well where I'm going."

"Then you know you're going towards the hold?"

"Yes I know I'm going – what?" He stopped stuffing his blanket into his pack and looked up. Isaac shook his head in exasperation, and pointed up the left end of the hall.

"The stairs to the top are that way."

"Hmm. Someone moved the stairs then," Isaac sighed, deciding it wasn't worth it. Gareth's mind tended to leave him for short journeys to nowhere. When his mind was home though, it was quite intelligent. You just had to get past the unlimited energy and lack of concentration first.

Picking up a small jar of buttons, Isaac twisted them to look better. Gareth saw the inquiring look and stopped packing.

"It's . . . a thing I do. I collect buttons," Isaac noticed Gareth was turning red. "When there's nothing to do, I go into whichever clothes shop in town and . . . buy one."

Seeing his look, Gareth went on, "Yes, I buy *one* button. Don't tell Mia . . . she'd just laugh." He cleared his throat and buckled his pack shut. "Well . . . let's go."

The two friends crossed to stairwell, and began their ascent.

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"What a dismal place this is," said Ivan, stomping on a dried plant. Isaac had to agree.

The sun was high in the sky above them, halfway through it's cycle towards daily death. The ground beneath them was scorched colourless from its relentless burn, with nothing to shelter it. Plants, where they actually grew, were saddened brittle things, breaking as easily as icicles beneath their boots.

Perhaps the only encouraging thing about the bare plains was that there was a forest at the end of them. It meant that the land wasn't unliveable; so there may well be people living there. That was their goal, to find some locals and be able to find out where they are. Or at least some sign.

It had occurred to Isaac that they may find either the Jupiter or Mars lighthouse here. The latter troubled him. If they did find the Mars lighthouse, they may also find the Fire Clan of the North. It was logical to assume they might live near the Mars lighthouse, because the Mercury clan had lived near their own lighthouse as well.

Of course, they might find nothing. Just an island full of vegetation but empty of life. Isaac wasn't sure which was preferable. Hopeful as they were that they would find some friendly people, they could always turn out to be hostile. He would almost prefer no people to dangerous people.

He turned his gaze back to the way ahead. It was still quite some distance to the dark belt of forest they were aiming for. The journey would last another three hours yet, at least. It was times like this that his mind wandered aimlessly all over the place.

At the moment, he was contemplating how it might be possible to tell a person's personality by the way they walk. He was judging by his own companions' footfalls.

Mia stepped over the spindly plants, or skirted them if they were too large.

Ivan was taking a direct path, and just crushing the vegetation if it was directly in his way.

Garet, however, went out of his way to stomp the offending plants.

Possibly Isaac was just reading too much into it. After all, he'd known his friends a good many months, so he was probably just equating their walking patterns with what he already knew. Perfectly gentle people might also like to stomp plants, and violent warriors might step over them.

Frowning, he noted his own pattern. Skirting the plants, weaving around them.

Avoidance of all possible trouble?

"What I don't understand," Garet said as he sent another innocent plant to its doom, "Is why you always wear your snow gear, Mia." He gave her a confused look. "Surely it's hot wearing all those clothes made for cold weather?"

"Well, yes, it is," the water adept replied. "But it's more than a matter of clothing to the Mercury clan. It signifies my

position and level of training. You see this-" Mia pointed to the circular pattern ringed with other lines at her waist.

"These symbols show that I'm a healer. Warriors, mages and scholars all have different symbols. It was meant to give people information about us at a glance, back when there were large numbers of Mercury adepts."

"Ok, but what about those?" Gareth pointed to Mia's ponytail, done up with four splayed ribbons. Mia swept her hand past her turquoise hair.

"You mean these?" Gareth nodded. "These are for ranking. Four ribbons means I'm of the fourth level. There are seven levels for each type of adept, seven levels of training that is. So I was about halfway through my training when you met me." She smiled self-consciously. "I doubt I'm still at level four anymore though."

"It all sounds so well planned out. But what happens when you reach the seventh level?" Ivan turned to ask her. Mia frowned.

"You know, I'm not quite sure. I think Alex may have said once that it means you become privy to some special Mercury techniques. Of course, I wouldn't go on that alone, being Alex's opinion . . ." she trailed off. Then she looked up, and smiled. "I think myself that you become enlightened. You fully understand the Mercury element, and yourself."

Ivan gave her a comforting smile. "I'm sure you'll do it someday, Mia." Gareth snorted, still crushing the brittle plants.

"Sounds a bit airy to me," Being in the lead, he didn't see the hurt look on the girls' face. But it was fleeting, and she continued to pick her path through the weeds.

Isaac's spirits lowered a bit. He wished Gareth weren't so unthinking all the time. If he'd only consider his words before he voiced them, he may have a better relationship with Mia. Sometimes, your opinion should be kept to yourself. He smiled a little at the irony of that thought, because he himself rarely let anyone know what he thought.

Such was his way.

Passing by some tired, stunted trees, Isaac began to feel uneasy. He couldn't see or hear anything odd. It was more of an instinct felt by his powers. He'd had this feeling before, this tangible whiff of danger somewhere near. He didn't like it.

Isaac halted. Beside him, Ivan came to a stop too, with a look of confusion on his face. Mia and Gareth had continued on for a few paces, arguing about the wisdom of defence before offence. Then they seemed to realise the others had stopped, and turned back to face them. Gareth put his fists on his hips.

"Why have we stopped? The forest is a good distance away, we need to get there before dark." Isaac wasn't listening to him though. He was looking around; trying to place the feeling, figure out where it was coming from.

Ivan's voice came out uneasy. "Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?" asked Mia. Ivan didn't respond. He was staring at the sky towards the mountains in the distance.

Gareth shifted his weight to another foot. "Now that you mention it . . . I feel something a little bit strange. I wasn't paying attention before . . ."

Before he could say another word, the sky exploded with light. The sheer brightness of it was tremendous. They threw up their arms to shield their eyes from blindness. But it didn't help much; the light burned through their eyelids. Accompanying the light was an ominous booming rumble, which seemed to shake the very ground beneath their feet. Had they been able to, they would have heard birds screeching in fright as they flew haphazardly through the air, seeking a way out of this alarming situation.

The light coalesced through Isaac's mind; shifting its colour so frequently it made him nauseous. Blue, red, yellow, mixtures of all, in a whirling display unlike any ever seen.

Just when it seemed to him that he couldn't take anymore, and he would be knocked unconscious from the phenomenon, the intensity of the shining display weakened somewhat. Whatever it was, it was losing power. Forcing himself to open an eye the barest amount, Isaac saw an incredible sight.

Huge cords of writhing lightning flashed across the sky, in violent shades of purple and yellow. They filled the air, snapping and cracking like a thousand whips. Trees and grasses were flattened to the ground from the ferocity of the electric lights. It seemed like a destruction wrought from heaven's fury.

Abruptly, the lightning grew thin, and died. The ground had stopped shaking, the rumble receding into silence. Far off, behind the mountains, the last of the celestial brightness faded into nothingness.

And all was still for a moment.

Timidly, Garet lowered his arms from his face. He looked around, bewildered. Fragile shrubs that he had mercilessly

crushed were either destroyed, or blown flat on the ground. Birds flew in disarray overhead, calling and crying in confusion.

Ivan was gasping, apparently shocked into breathlessness by the lights. Mia still had her face buried in her hands. But slowly, she withdrew them, to stare with frightened eyes at the mountains to the southwest.

None of them looked at each other, neither did they speak. They did not need to; they all knew what the other was thinking.

What had just happened?

24/04/03 - Fixed some errors.

***Chapter 5*: Barrier**

Haha! I told you I'd finish this chapter soon, and look. I delivered within a week of saying so. Ain't it grand? Without further ado, here is chapter five of When All Else Fails: Barrier.

He was unable to take his eyes from those mountains. The stunning, frightening lights in the sky had come from that direction, and had receded there as well. What Isaac was afraid of, was that it could happen again at any time. Worse yet, it may actually hurt them next time, if that time ever did come.

Finally tearing his gaze away, Isaac instead turned to the way they had come. Besides the flattened grasslands and squawking mass of birds, a person would never know what had happened.

Unless they had been there.

He didn't know what to think. He felt like his mind was going to war, with two opposing sides trying to win out. The safer thing to do, it seemed, would be to go back to the ship, and leave this place. They didn't need this; they needed to find Felix, and the Jupiter Lighthouse before it was too late. If they didn't, he couldn't even bear to think about what may happen.

But what if *this* was where the Jupiter Lighthouse was? What if the lightning and thunderous noise had been Felix lighting the flame? Turning around and leaving could

be the worst possible thing to do. They could conceivably miss them by the barest of distances.

Isaac dragged his gloved hand through his disorderly hair, then looked up once more.

They were watching him, waiting,

Isaac inhaled sharply through his teeth. Mia, Gareth and Ivan stood there, eyes fixed on his. They were waiting for him to make a decision. Isaac was the leader; he made the choices. The choices that governed their fates.

The choices that governed everyone's fate.

His mind went into that all too familiar state of panic. He had to choose. He had to. But . . . what to choose? How *could* he choose?

Disjointed images flashed through his mind, both real and unreal. The world aflame; Jenna screaming as Saturos held her; Mercury Lighthouse with its beacon alight; a shadow crossing the lands; Kraden telling him and Gareth about the Elemental Stars . . . his mother . . . his father . . .

His choice.

Resolutely, Isaac forced himself to take a step. A step towards the mountains.

~*~

It was cool and pleasant under the trees. The crushed leaves under their feet filled the air with the sharp scent of greenery. Many of the trees' branches reached skywards, leaving the lower half of the forest clear but for the bushes

and grass. Leaves skittered across the ground with the breeze.

Having slept in the open the night before, Isaac found it a relief to have made it to the belt of trees. Being out on the dismal plains had been unnerving, as they had been clearly visible, even without a fire. He had been ill at ease, and had taken two watches to settle himself.

His companions had relaxed visibly, too, and were quite willing to put the previous days' disturbing events out of their minds. But he could still see they were worried, beneath their veneers of indifference.

"Garet, would you stop destroying everything you touch!" came Mia's exasperated voice.

When travelling, Garet seemed to have the most uncanny knack for breaking things. Even when he wasn't doing it intentionally, it still happened. It was a little understandable, considering his size, but most other times he did it anyway, regardless of how far away the poor plant, rock or flower was.

Garet's latest idea involved using a stick he'd found to smack against branches, shaking copious amounts of leaf litter to the ground in his wake. Unfortunately, that happened to include Ivan, Mia and Isaac.

Pulling the offending vegetation from his straw coloured hair, Ivan sighed.

"You could at least go behind us, so we don't get showered,"

Pausing in the middle of a swing, Garet seemed to consider the possibility. Then he turned, all smiles, and went

to the back of the group.

"Fair enough," and with that carried on with his business. Isaac had to wonder, sometimes, if that Mars adept had any respect for the land he lived on.

"So anyway," Mia turned to Ivan. "What do you think?"

"I'm not really sure. I don't have the best abilities when it comes to offensive Psynergy. You should probably ask Garet, or Isaac."

"You see that's the point. That's why I'm asking you. Those two are obviously quite capable of blasting mountains away with their power, so they wouldn't quite understand what I mean."

"I suppose," the wind seer kicked a pebble up the trail ahead of him. "But I've never given it much thought, to tell you the truth. I've just learned to be happy with what I know."

"Even so, you are slightly stronger than me. Much as I hate to admit it, I'm surely the weakest here in terms of offensive attacks. I'm not saying I *want* to get stronger, that's not really my goal. I'd rather find clever ways of using my powers that cause more damage, but still require the same amount of energy."

"Strategically placing your attacks, stuff like that?"

"Maybe. More like . . . I don't know," The girl shrugged her shoulders, seemingly lost in thought.

The forest sounds could be heard without competition for a while, only interrupted by their footfalls and the occasional 'whack' of Garet's stick.

Thinking about Mia's problem, Isaac suddenly hit upon an idea.

"Needles."

Ivan and Mia turned to him. Mia looked perplexed.

"What do you . . . *oh!*" She immediately looked pleased. "That was a good idea, Isaac. Just the kind of thing I was aiming for."

Ivan still looked confused. "What have we all agreed on?" Mia spun about, smiling like someone who had just solved the problem that no one else could ever do.

"It was what I meant! Using the same attack, but changing the approach. You see, I have some ice Psynergy, right? Well, throwing large chunks of it is definitely devastating, but there is still the chance that I would miss the enemy, because there were so few of them, and they were big enough to block and so on. If I were to fire *ice needles* at them, they would have a considerable time trying to block them all. Besides that, I could make *thousands* of the needles, and they'd bombard the enemy, and shred them to pieces!"

"But someone like a Mars adept could use a firewall and melt them," came Garet's voice from behind Isaac.

"Ah yes, but to do that, they'd have to spend some precious energy, and they wouldn't even have hit me. So I win out, either way." Mia looked excited enough that Isaac half expected her to start practising on a few trees.

Morning gave way to afternoon, though under the canopy of leaves they felt little change in weather. Even if there had been an increase in temperature, they wouldn't

have faltered for a moment. Days of trekking through deserts had given them a stronger spine than most travellers.

Still walking along the scant trail, Isaac was brooding. Something about the forest was giving him an odd feeling, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what it was. It was like standing near the ocean, and hearing someone yelling, but you cannot tell if it's really a person or just the eternal crash of the waves.

Still they walked.

The further into the trees he got, the more agitated he became. The feeling was *growing*, yet it wasn't becoming clear what he felt. Isaac fumbled absently with the medallion in his pocket, absently picking at the grooves.

Behind him, there was the impact of boots hitting stone and a curse.

"Someone ought to clear this path a little, a person could break something!"

"Only someone as uncoordinated as you, you mean, Gareth?" came Mia's disinterested reply. Isaac heard them, yet didn't hear them. He hated this feeling ... this feeling always came before danger.

Still they marched. Hairs on the back of his neck rose with a chill. He cast a look over his shoulder, seeing only a fuming Gareth.

Isaac turned back to the path. The winding trail suddenly looked sinister. Before he could give it much more thought, or even ask the others if they felt something, they rounded a corner and stopped.

"Wow..." breathed Ivan.

Isaac knew then, the cause of that dismal feeling.

Before them was a barrier. But it was unlike any barrier they had seen yet. Most walls and boundaries were made of stone or wood. Not this one. It cut a line straight through their path, not placed around things, but *through* them. Trees, boulders and ground were sliced, yet they were whole.

For this was not a wall of stone, indeed of any physical material. The barrier glowed and vibrated, a transparent field of energy. It never held a design; it continually shifted its lights of red, blue and yellow. It was there, and it was not.

It was a Psynergy barrier.

The four of them stood transfixed by the sight. It was beautiful, horrifying and unexplainable all at once. The sight of it had stolen their breath from their lungs, and they were only now taking it back. Their clothes fluttered lightly with the power radiating from the wall, and their hair stood on end in wild-looking patterns. Leaf-litter on the ground skittered around, and leaves trembling on the ends of branches fell.

Colours shifted in Ivan's eyes, reflected as Isaac glanced at him. The sight gave him the mental shake he needed, and he forced himself to stop looking at the wonder. Instead, he set off along side it, keeping well away, following its path.

He heard the tell-tale sounds behind him that told him the others had snapped out of their trance and were doing the same thing. They'd been together so long that

they had certain jobs in situations like this, and they just automatically went to the task without consulting each other.

"It's not cutting the ground in anyway," came Gareth's gruff analysis. "But then, it also looks like it's going *through* the ground. I can't really tell though, unless I start digging."

"The trees and plants don't seem disturbed. They haven't been affected at all. It could mean this barrier has been here a long, long time. Or, that it just doesn't impact on its surroundings." Mia turned from the fern she'd been studying. "Possibly, it's not even here at all."

Isaac stopped walking along, as it was getting hard to hear them, and started back. He could see Mia and Gareth talking through the trees. Ivan was standing a little ways apart, fingertips to his temples. Mia and Gareth turned to him when he arrived.

"Just keeps going. Doesn't seem to end anywhere near here," he said. Mia looked a little dismayed, but Gareth, to Isaac's surprise, looked a little bored. There was a sigh from behind them, and Ivan joined them.

"It certainly *looks* like Psynergy. But for the life of me I can't get a stable reading on it. Sometimes the strength of it burns my mind; but other times it's barely there at all." He looked pained. "Sorry I can't be of more help."

"Don't be like that," Mia said, moving around to pat Ivan on the shoulder. "It's not your fault this barrier is hard to understand." Ivan didn't really look convinced, but he smiled at Mia anyway.

They turned their attention to the shimmering barrier.

"So what do we do then?" asked Ivan, gazing up at the phenomenon. Gareth snorted beside him,

"We go right through it and carry on." Mia looked horrified at the very thought, and Isaac was certainly *feeling* horrified at the very thought.

"You *cannot* be serious!" she cried, looking at him with a mixture of fear and irritation. "I know that 'charge on ahead, lads' is your answer to everything, Gareth, but this is different."

"Why is this different?" Gareth asked peevishly.

"It's a *glowing wall*! What if you walk into it, and you get burned, or decapitated, or melted, or -"

"Alright, I get the point." But he was looking slightly sick now, which was better than nothing, Isaac thought. "So what do you propose then?"

"Oh, well, uh . . ." It was clear that Mia hadn't anticipated that she'd win the argument. "I mean, we will have to go through it of course," Gareth got that supreme look of 'I'm right, you're wrong', but Mia didn't notice, "But we aren't just going to walk into it like it's made of air, or fluffy bunnies."

"Fluffy bunnies can be very scary in large numbers."

"Oh do shut up, Gareth."

"It's true. I was smothered as a child. Right, Isaac?" Isaac couldn't stop himself grinning from the memory. Although having about four rabbits jump onto him was hardly what he'd call 'smothered', it had been very funny all

the same. Especially when Gareth started screaming at Isaac to get them off him, the horrid things.

"When the two of you come back from memory lane," Ivan's voice cut into Isaac's daydream. "The problem at hand needs your attention." Gareth looked annoyed.

"I still don't see why we can't go through it."

"We can, Gareth, and we *will*, but we need to know more about it first," sighed Mia, twirling some blue hair around her finger in agitation. "I don't suppose we could throw a branch at it, or something?"

In response, Gareth heaved his whacking stick straight into the barrier. Unconsciously, they all tensed as the branch whipped through the air. Then it connected.

And went through, unharmed, untouched.

They all stared at the stick, as it bounced to the ground, and stopped. Relaxing just as unconsciously as he'd stiffened, Isaac eyed the piece of wood warily. It wasn't every day you threw something at a glowing, crackling wall and didn't get so much as a puff of smoke. The warning bells in his head were going off, but for no reason other than the fact that nothing had happened.

"Well that was spectacular," Gareth yawned, brushing a leaf out of his flame-hair. "Let's throw a rock at it now."

"Not much point, is there?" mused Ivan, still looking at the innocent tree branch. "It would only do the same thing: fly right through as though it's not there. I don't think this wall is meant for stopping solid objects. That's why those trees look like they're split in half, because the wall just passes through them."

"Well it must be here for *something*. Unless the people here find it entertaining. 'Oh, it's boring today, let's make a shimmering wall and scare some tourists!'"

"I know you're joking, but it might be possible." That seemed to render the Fire Adept speechless for a moment. Ivan raked his fingers through his straw coloured hair, seemingly frustrated at himself. "I don't know. It doesn't *feel* like Psynergy. Not really."

Mia looked up in surprise. "You think so? I can feel a lot of Psynergy pulsing out of it."

"So can I," Gareth put in.

"I do," Isaac found himself saying. Though he didn't say that his hair was standing on end, his nerves were tingling, and that he had a very bad feeling in his gut.

Ivan, on the other hand, tilted his head in thought. "I can't feel anything much. Sure, I can feel energy of some description, but no Psynergy. Maybe it's just me," he trailed off. Then his eyes lit up. "Maybe it won't affect me if I try to go through it. Maybe I'm the only one here on the same wavelength. If I can't feel anything dangerous, it mustn't be dangerous!"

"Only for you though," snorted Gareth. "The rest of us might waltz into our deaths." Isaac winced. He wished Gareth wasn't so flip about death.

Ivan seemed convinced, however, that this was the way to go. He argued on for a few more minutes, then when he realised he wasn't winning anyone over, he ended with, "If anyone has a better idea, I'd like to hear it. Even if you do, I'm going."

And, without giving Isaac any chance to consider what he'd said, he marched over to the wall and shoved his hand into it.

Everyone, even Ivan, stood frozen with the abruptness of what he'd just done. Isaac felt that if he moved even a hair, all hell might break loose. That second lasted forever, an awful timeless time of suspense.

Then time moved on, and nothing dreadful happened. No one died, or burned, or lost their arms. There weren't even any dazzling light shows like the one that had happened the day before. Isaac felt immense relief, which was quickly replaced by irritation.

"Are you *HAPPY* now?" Gareth shouted, an edge of hysteria in his voice that only Isaac noticed. He wasn't paying attention to Gareth though. He was focussed on Ivan.

The wind seer was still standing with his arm halfway through the glowing barrier, apparently unharmed. Although, Isaac thought with a shudder, it could have sent him stark raving mad and they just didn't know it yet. But then Ivan beamed at them, and said "I told you so: nothing to worry about at all." It seemed true enough. The barrier didn't even seem to have noticed the arm that had been punched right through it; it just kept on writhing and glowing in shades of red, blue and yellow.

"Alright then," Ivan said, pulling his arm back out, "Who wants to come through?"

Isaac thought this was a very stupid question indeed.

"Oh, Ivan, I don't know," Mia said quietly, obviously torn between wanting to carry on and wanting to run like mad. Gareth however, looked like he'd won some sort of bet.

"Of course I'll go! I told you it was fine; but only Ivan could prove it to you, obviously." Giving them a ticked off look, Gareth stomped over to Ivan and stood there with his fists on his hips.

Mia fidgeted a bit, then, biting her lip, moved over to them.

This left Isaac alone on the path. He had the terrible feeling that things were spiralling out of his control. The decisions were being made for him, whether they were destined for disaster or not.

He looked up from the forest floor, to where his companions were waiting. There was no way he was going to let them do this alone. Taking a firm grip on his terror, he came over to them.

The humming vibrations from the wall were even worse from this proximity. He could feel his teeth rattling and his clothes snapping from the rampant energy. Ivan glanced at them all.

"I think you should all grab a hold of me. That way, it'll be safer for you. We still don't know what could happen when you go through."

Isaac nodded, his throat too constricted to reply. He reached out and took hold of the seer's left arm. As he did so, Mia and Gareth latched on to Ivan's right. Unconsciously, they all took one last breath. Then they stepped forward into the barrier.

A ferocious power ripped through Isaac's body, paralysing him through and through. Vaguely he felt his feet lift off the ground, but his attention was fully on the horrible sensation going on under his skin. It felt like he was being

torn open and having the spirit snatched from him. Winds unlike he'd ever felt and was unlikely to feel again smashed his face. A thought shot through his pain like an arrow: he'd let go of Ivan. There was no time for this thought though; it was blasted aside by a violent motion. Suddenly, he was under the impression that he was flying at a great speed, but all he could see were the flaring lights around him. As he felt his mind start to loose it's grip on consciousness, Isaac felt a terrific impact on his back. His body twisted, but seconds later he was slammed in the leg. He tried to scream, but his voice couldn't make it out of his throat. Then his head hit something hard, and he knew no more.

I bet that was fun for Isaac. That last bit took forever to write out. It's so much easier in the mind where you get visual aids :P. Anyway, any comments you have, like if there's some bad continuity in there somewhere, please review! Or don't, I wouldn't blame you. I'm so nasty for keeping this on the backburner.

***Chapter 6*: Arity**

This chapter came relatively fast, for me. And now I'm getting to what I actually want to write, not those awful bits of rubbish that set up the story. You should all be grateful, I have an exam in like, 20 minutes.

Chapter 6: Arity

It was hard to tell if he was awake or not. The darkness continued, endless. Yet now, now he could feel again, and he didn't feel well at all. His muscles ached dully, and his thoughts swam through a thick soup. Light shimmered beyond his closed eyelids, and he felt a stab of fear, that the light might have been *it* again.

But Ivan was not going to just lie there, in goodness knows what state, forever. He forced himself to open his eyes, and instantly wished he hadn't. Dim as the lights were, they hurt his vision. Shutting his eyes again, Ivan tried to sort out what he'd seen. It was quite difficult, as he'd only gotten an impression of colour and light. He resigned himself to sore eyes, and opened them again.

After the initial confusion of light and dark had righted itself, he gazed around. His head was tilted to the side, giving him full view of a small fireplace, which had a decent blaze going. Finding the dancing flames a bit too much for his poor vision, he turned away from the fire. There was a roughly cut wooden table, and a couple of chairs to his left, with various jars and utensils on it. Nothing unusual.

The walls were made of tightly fitting planks, and judging by their closeness it was quite a small room. Beyond the table, there was a dark opening into another room. Try as he might, Ivan couldn't make head nor tail of what might be in there. Sighing, he turned right. And froze.

A girl was sitting on a stool, staring at him intently. Ivan couldn't believe he hadn't noticed her before; his instincts were failing him today.

Noticing that he'd noticed her, the girl straightened up. "You're awake. That's good."

Ivan's tired mind was not cooperating, so he said nothing. Getting a more thorough look at her, he could see that she really wasn't a girl. She could only be a year older than he, at the most. She was dressed in a simple tunic, and her blonde hair looked red in the firelight. She gave him another look. He felt uneasy, and it wasn't just because of being in a house with a stranger.

"Are you mute?" Ivan was startled enough this time to answer.

"Oh. No, I'm not."

"Well, that's good I suppose." She tilted her head a bit, still looking at him. "Do you know what happened to you?"

Ivan bit his lip, then squirmed around till he was in a sitting position. He ignored the tiny stabbing pains that erupted through his muscles, and turned his thoughts to her question. To his surprise, he couldn't quite remember what *had* happened. Oh, he knew he had the information in his head somewhere, but at the moment it was all out of order. The last thing he clearly remembered doing was arguing

with the others over whether he should touch the barrier or not.

"Not really," he mumbled absently. The girl looked a bit dismayed by this.

"I'm afraid I can't really help you much more without knowing more about what happened to you. Your . . .*injury* isn't known to me." She smiled wanly. "Although, I never was much good at healing."

Feeling a little uncomfortable, Ivan tried even harder to remember what happened. But his thoughts kept getting interrupted by his other thought: what injury was she talking about? As far as he could feel, he still had all his arms and legs intact, and he thought he'd know about any broken bones or monstrous gashes.

A slight scraping brought Ivan back to reality. The girl had left her seat and was coming around to his side of the bed. Kneeling down, she reached out and touched her fingers to his left temple. This reminded him so vividly of Mia when she healed Psynergy afflictions that he had to force himself not to pull back. He stared apprehensively at her as she brought her other hand around to his right temple, and shut her eyes.

Warning bells started going off at the back of his mind. Something about what she was doing was vaguely familiar in another way.

Suddenly, she opened her eyes again, and now Ivan could see that they were a mossy-sort of green. She gave him a long, searching look.

"You're a seer."

He knew then what she'd been doing. Scanning for Psynergy. He turned away from her hard stare. Why hadn't he been able to feel her searching?

"Yes. And so are you, I see."

"More so than you, at the moment." Ivan looked puzzled, and seeing his look she went on. "Haven't you noticed that your Psynergy has virtually vanished? It was only by doing a Psynergy sweep on you just now that I could tell, and even then I only found traces of energy in your system. Otherwise, you're completely empty of Psynergy."

Ivan realised with a shock that she was right. The vague feeling of disquiet that had been with him since he woke up was because he was missing such an important part of himself. He hadn't thought that he'd ever be without it; even when he was extremely low on energy he could still feel its essence deep in his centre. It was like something had died inside him, and he'd only just become aware of it.

A jittery panic started rising in his stomach, but Ivan crushed it ruthlessly. He would not lose his head. He couldn't afford to. Instead, he pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. If he wasn't going to have a total breakdown, he could at least be pitiful while he was sane.

Worse, was the stabbing pain of being alone with a stranger. Where were the others? Mia, Garet, Isaac? Had they left him with her? Did they get blown away as well?

Where they all dead?

Without noticing he began to shake a little. He couldn't go on if they were gone. Hardly a year he'd spent with them, yet those three people were closer to him than anyone else he'd ever known. Perhaps, if Ivan had known his

parents, that might not be true. But the thought of being so dreadfully alone in a strange place was terrifying.

No. He furiously pushed those thoughts away. No, he wouldn't think like that. He wouldn't be so pessimistic. Taking in some calming breaths, he got himself under control once more.

Ivan looked up again to find the girl still watching him. She seemed to have been waiting for him to get himself together again. There was something about her that seemed used to dealing with people all the time.

Suddenly she looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry. My name's Arity." Ivan hadn't even realised until then that he didn't know her name. He'd been too focussed on his own grief.

"My name's Ivan."

"Well, Ivan," Arity said, standing up. "I suggest you get your stuff together. We're leaving."

He stared at her. "Leaving? We?"

"Yes. Now that you're conscious, it's best that we leave this place." Before he could ask another question, Arity had disappeared into the other room.

Feeling extremely confused, Ivan glanced around and found his other clothes and gear beside the bed. Flipping the sheets off him, he swung his legs down onto the floor. Ignoring the stubborn pain in his muscles he started pulling his cloak back on. He felt irritated that this Arity was bossing him around like he was an ignorant child. Sure, he wasn't the most mature of men, but he certainly wasn't a little kid

anymore. He was that indistinct age between boyhood and manhood: not quite in either world.

Whilst Ivan was wrestling his boots onto his feet, he had a thought. "Um, excuse me," he called out towards the door. "Do you know where my sword is?"

After a few seconds, "It's under the table."

Finished with his clothes, he dropped down onto his knees beside the wooden table. Underneath he found his waist pack, sword and small dagger. He retrieved them, and strapped the pack back on. He was in the process of attaching his swords' sheath when Arity came back into the room.

In the short time she'd been gone she'd completely changed her outfit. Instead of the plain clothes from before, she had a grey cloak fastened over a sleeveless leather vest. A sturdy belt, probably for holding swordsheaths, was buckled around the waist. There was a length of material halfway around under the belt, something like a half-skirt. Travel-worn boots came up to mid-calf, where the longer pants were stuffed in. A travelling pack was dumped onto the table, whilst she dug through a cupboard. Seconds later, she'd pulled out a jumble of objects. Arity picked up the gauntlets and shoved them on roughly, then snatched a metal headband off the table. It was a polished silver-metal band, half a circle, with two small spiked wings at each end. She pushed it into her hair at the top of her head, then reached for the last object on the table.

It was like no other sword that Ivan had seen, and he'd seen a fair variety on his travels. For the most part, it was simply a very average, if not lethal, looking sword. The blade was certainly impressive, being longer than her arm

by a goodly distance, and sharpened to a razor's edge. But that wasn't what was interesting about the sword. Between the leather-wrapped hilt and the blade, the guard was splayed out massively, into what looked like serrated metal wings on either side of the blade. Whilst it was rounded and smooth near the handle, further out and up there were a number of sharp 'feathers', which curved around and ended a third of the way up the main blade. It was a nasty looking thing in anyone's language, and Ivan pitied the poor soul who had the sword pushed in far enough to get a taste of the wings as well.

He certainly now understood what the extra material around Arity's waist was for.

Having slid the sword into its' sheath, Arity looked up and saw Ivan staring at the blade. She smiled faintly, and said, "It has that effect on most people." Then the smile was gone. "We have to leave now. You're ready?" He nodded, though he still didn't know what was going on.

In a blink she'd strode over to the door again and gone through. Ivan took it as a given that he was expected to follow, and he did so. Barely noticing what the room was for, he headed for the new door at the other side, where pale light was coming through.

Ivan took three steps out of the door, then stopped dead.

It was a nightmare of ruined homes. Charred wood and stone lay scattered with wild abandon over the rough dirt roads. There was smoke billowing into the sky from spots all around, though it looked like little was still burning. To his left, a creaking piece of timber snapped and fell to the ground with a dull thump on what had been a doorstep. But

far more horrifying was the carnage. Men, women and children lay dead in the streets of this village. It was obvious that they were no warrior people; whoever had done this had met no resistance. Ivan felt sick as he saw a young girl, no more than three, lying in her mother's arms, with a shocking wound in her small chest.

Unable to look anymore, he turned away, only to find Arity staring out at the scene. She had the look that he'd seen Isaac wear so often: the look of someone who was hiding what they truly felt. But her eyes were alive with anger.

Suddenly, she started walking away at a fast pace, in the direction of the mountains. Startled out of his reverie, Ivan had to jog to catch up. Even when he had, he needed to work hard to keep up to her. She seemed determined to go as fast as possible, wherever it was she was going. Having no idea where he was anyway, Ivan had no choice but to follow her. But he wasn't going to just go anywhere without knowing why. Plus, he had somewhere he needed to go. The only place he could think of that could give him the answer to what happened to the others. The centre of the island, where the lightning had retreated.

~*~

It had been three long hours, and the shadows across the plains were lengthening, and they hadn't spoken a word. Ivan had settled into a dull monotonous pattern of walking. His mind was full of tired static; he'd spent the lonely time trying desperately to retrieve any trace of Psynergy to himself. All he'd managed to do was work up a terrible headache, which wasn't helping things at all. He'd settled into a gloom, having come to terms with the fact that his Psynergy was indeed gone. Possibly never to return. He

hadn't yet come to terms with *that* idea. He didn't want to even contemplate it.

Reaching up his arm to flick his hair away from his eyes for the umpteenth time, Ivan vaguely took note of where they were. For all intents and purposes, they seemed to be heading towards mountains. However, he didn't know if those were the same mountains that he had viewed from the seashore with his friends, or some totally different ranges. For all he knew, he wasn't even on the same landmass anymore.

He glanced over towards Arity. The woman hadn't stopped for a rest even once, and seemed to be set to march all night long as well. He was dreading that, and had half a mind to stop completely once it got dark. Whether she noticed or not. He was so tired that it didn't matter to him any longer.

Halfway through a yawn, Ivan noticed that Arity had dropped back to be walking level with him. She was probably fed up with him going so slow. Maybe she'd start spearing him with that awful sword -

"I suppose you don't know what's going on." Ivan gave a derisive snort in response. "Alright fine. Stay ignorant."

"No, no. I'd like to know, really. I'm just . . . annoyed."

"With what?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. Waking up in a strange house, with a strange girl, in a town that's been massacred by goodness knows what, then walking an ungodly long distance without even a rest: I don't think there's much to complain about. Maybe I woke up on the wrong side of the bed." If there was

one thing that Ivan's companions had noticed about him, it was that when he was tired he worked up quite a sarcastic vocabulary.

She looked at him sideways, then turned her attention back ahead. "Would you have preferred being awake for the massacre?" Ivan couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he said nothing. She sighed slightly. "Sorry. I just didn't think it was much good staying there any longer. I also thought it would be good to be far away in case they returned."

Ivan instantly wanted to know more, but figured it would be better to start at the beginning. "Where did you find me?"

"In a bush."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite. I was in the woods, looking for potion ingredients. And I heard something strange. It was not a usual forest sound, so I went to have a look. At which point I found you in a patch of shrubs, moaning and not generally looking too well. It seemed that the right thing to do would be to take you back to the house."

She stopped talking then. Ivan was severely annoyed that the story 'ended' there. Just as he was about to snap at her, she stopped completely and faced him.

"Why did you touch the barrier?"

Once again, Ivan was shocked speechless. Then his mind regained some composure. "How did you -"

"What else could take your power?" Fair enough, Ivan thought. "What concerns me, is the very fact that it did take your Psynergy from you. It should not have."

"But then, how could you assume I'd touched the barrier?"

"Because touching the barrier revokes the powers of adepts who *aren't* of the air element." Ivan stared at her in disbelief. Seeing this, Arity returned his look with one of slight annoyance. "I've been through the barrier myself many times, and because I'm of the air it doesn't disturb me."

Sinking into thought, Ivan tried to recollect the events in front of the shimmering wall. They'd fought over it, and he – feeling useless – had volunteered to touch it. His friends had flat out refused, but he'd done it anyway. He remembered plunging his arm into it the first time, and it hadn't been terrible or painful. In fact, it was just like shoving your arm into thin air, except this air was vibrant and bright. After that. . .

"Oh no," he groaned, bringing both hands up to rake his hair. "It was the others." Arity gave him a questioning look. He glanced at her and decided to elaborate. "I didn't go through the barrier alone. I was with," he paused with a tinge of depression, "my friends. They aren't Jupiter adepts. It must have been that. I thought that if they held onto me, we could get through all right." He was shivering, but not from the cold. It's all your fault, it's all because of you. . .

"Listen," Arity's flat tone broke through his self-induced agony, "I can only assume you aren't from around here. Because all the adepts in this place know about the

barrier. Even the one's on the outer side. Where do you come from?"

"Angara," he said listlessly. "We came on a ship."

"I don't know this place."

"No. . . I don't suppose you would."

"You're tired, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes I am!" Ivan snapped suddenly, and half-yelling at her. "And if we don't stop and make camp now, I'll . . . well, I'll do it anyway." And with that, he stopped, and dropped his pack to the ground. In a bit of a rage he set about breaking branches off a dead tree, with the vague idea that he could make a fire, but mainly just to break something. He grinned a bit sadly; this was how Gareth would make his feelings known, not him.

Having thrown himself into the 'gathering' of firewood, Ivan hadn't bothered to notice what Arity might be doing. Not that he cared. The woman was an enigma and an annoyance.

Spinning around to drop another poor tree's arm in the pile, he was met with the sight of a small fire. Behind it stood Arity, arms crossed and apparently waiting for him to be finished. Getting a surge of irrational anger once more, Ivan heaved the pile of firewood up and dropped it closer to the blaze. He didn't realise his face was red, and neither would he have noticed. It was completely dark by now, and the moon had yet to rise.

Finished with the firewood, Ivan sat down heavily and started tearing through his pack. He'd only just realised how hungry he was. He had no idea how long he'd been

unconscious, and of course Arity hadn't told him. Finding a jar of waybread, he pulled off the lid only to be disappointed. There were only two pieces left. He sighed and dug one out.

As he bit into the stale bread, he let his mind lapse into an unsteady calm. There was no point getting moody. He was more exhausted than he had ever felt, and that was making his judgement lax. Dimly he was aware of Arity getting food from her own pack, but he didn't care. He finished off the bread, and returned the jar to his pack. Putting his cloak on the ground, he rolled over on to it.

Without so much as a word of 'goodnight', he fell asleep.

Yes, I'm evil, I introduced an original character. I hope the purists don't kill me. And I full-on promise to do the next chapter on Mia's point of view.

27/04/03 - Fixed some errors

***Chapter 7*: Divided**

Ahaha . . . it's been many, many . . .
manymanymanymanyMANY moons, but I've finally written
another chapter! *Gasp*shock*horror* Yeah I know. How
slack of me. But to tell the truth, I lost inspiration for this fic
for a long time, and it only recently came back to me after
playing The Lost Age.

Before you read this, I suggest that you reread the other
chapters if you've read them before. It's been a while, and I
definitely needed to read them over myself. For anyone new,
I'd like to restate the fact that this story is pre-Lost Age. That
means that I started writing it BEFORE Lost Age came out.
So, anything that happens is based on the first game only,
not what happens in the second. Anyway, read on.

Chapter 7: Divided

There was a sound nearby. Sharp, like twigs
snapping. The noise brought her back to consciousness,
though not fully. Her eyes still shut, Mia allowed feeling to
return to her body. When it had, she wished she were still
asleep. She ached all over, and a headache was beginning
to throb into her skull. Groaning, she shifted a bit and found
that she was lying facedown on the ground. She managed to
push herself over onto her back and open her eyes.

A canopy of trees shielded her vision. Lone shafts of
sunlight streamed through gaps and illuminated the dust
slowly spiraling through the air. *I'm in a . . . forest?* She tried

to focus her thoughts. *But the trees are different from the other ones.*

Suddenly her memory flashed back to her. Forest. Walking. Barrier. Pain. Falling. In shock Mia sat up way too fast, and clutched at her head as it span in protest. Bringing her hand away she saw a bit of blood on it. Hesitantly she touched her forehead again; her fingers traced along an open cut just above her eyebrow. That's where she was bleeding. Removing her hands again she looked around. It seemed like just an ordinary forest, quite like the one she had been in before touching the barrier. But the trees were indeed different; they were shorter and the foliage was greener. *Where on Weyard am I?* She had no idea.

Getting unsteadily to her feet, Mia looked around again. Now she was getting anxious. Where were the others? She couldn't see them anywhere. Forest noises, creaking and twittering, didn't offer her any answers.

"Isaac?" she called out softly. No reply. "Garet? Ivan?" Still nothing. Moving forward a bit, she called again. Nothing. Feeling awfully alone, she kept walking. It was no good staying here.

A few minutes later she found her staff. Picking it up gratefully, she checked around for her bag. When she came across it, she was dismayed to find that it was half-empty. All her herbs were gone, and a number of potions were missing. *Some forest creatures have probably been rummaging through it.* The brief happiness at finding her gear faded as she remembered that she was alone in a strange place. She started moving again, shouting as she went.

"Garet! Isaac! Ivan! Are you here? Can you hear me?" As she picked her way through the forest dark thoughts crept into

her mind. What if they weren't anywhere near her? The barrier had lifted her up and thrown her to this place; they might have been taken elsewhere. They might be on the other side of the island. They might be hurt. Or. . .

She gulped. *Don't think like that. Stay optimistic. You're still here, and not badly hurt. There's no reason to think that the others are.* Stepping around a large fern, she called out again.

"Isaac! Can anyone hear me?" As she paused to take another breath, Mia thought she heard something. Stopping, she listened. Faintly she heard a moan from nearby. Happy and afraid all at once, she turned on the spot and pushed through some large undergrowth. She didn't hear anything again so she called out. "I heard you, I'm coming!" Finally beating her way through the stubborn plant, she came out into a small clearing.

Isaac lay sprawled on the ground at the base of a tree near the end of the clearing. Feeling her heart stop for a moment Mia froze. But then he shifted and relief flooded through her. She ran across the clearing to him and crouched down next to him. "Oh Isaac, I'm so glad I found you. Are you okay?" Seeing that he wasn't fully conscious she took hold of his shoulders and pulled him up next to the tree, so that he was sitting. The movement caused him to groan again, and she paused, worried. She touched a hand to his face. "Isaac? Please wake up. Come on."

"Unh . . . what?" Opening his eyes, Isaac gazed blearily at Mia. "Mia?"

"Yes, it's me. I was so worried, I thought I was all alone and I didn't know what had happened to you." He blinked a few times and tried to focus on her.

"What . . . what did happen?" She briefly felt worried at his strained breathing but decided to tell him anyway.

"It was the barrier I think. Remember we all went into it together? Something about it . . . it tore us off the ground and flung us out here. I haven't been able to find Ivan or Gareth yet." That woke him right up. He started and made to move.

"We've got to - *ah!*" Crying out, he doubled over and clutched at his chest. Alarmed, Mia instantly pushed him back so that she could get a better look. The fact that he didn't protest only confirmed her worries. He was usually so stubborn about being checked.

"Stop moving. Something's wrong, let me check." He merely nodded with his eyes shut tight, wincing. Getting into healer mode, she quickly untied his chest plate and removed it. The shirt underneath didn't have any blood on it, so that rejected the possibility of a gash. She slid her hands underneath the thin shirt and felt over his chest. Running her fingers along each rib, she suddenly came to what felt awfully like a dent. Isaac flinched when she touched it, lightly though she did, and bit back a cry. Looking up at him with a frown, she continued to check. Another rib on this side felt the same, and on his right there was a rib that seemed to be fractured.

She pulled her hands back from under his shirt, feeling intensely worried. Looking back up at Isaac, she saw him attempting to hide the extent of his pain from her. But she wouldn't be fooled.

"Isaac, this isn't good. You've got two broken ribs on the left, and one on the right that's fractured." He didn't seem to be

paying much attention though. Taking in ragged gasps he was staring into nothingness.

"It hurts . . . to breathe . . ."

"Oh, no . . . I'll have to heal you right now, or it might get worse. Just stay still for a second."

Bringing her hands up again she held them just above the points on his chest where the injuries were. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and focused herself. She sent her thoughts to the center of her mind, questing, searching for the necessary power. She waited.

Nothing came.

Frightened, Mia reached for a different strand of her Psynergy. But it wouldn't come. No matter how hard she cast about for her power she couldn't find it. *It was gone.*

She dropped her hands and pulled back. Staring at her palms, she felt terribly confused and afraid. *Where could it have gone? In all my studies I've never heard of anything like this happening. Psynergy is supposed to be deeply linked to the soul. So for it to have gone is . . .* Isaac's voice brought her back from the depths of her mind.

"What's wrong?" Feeling faint, she turned back to the Venus adept.

"Can you feel any of your Psynergy?" The confusion in his face briefly cancelled out the pain. Then he obliged her, closing his eyes and growing still. Anxiously she waited for him.

Less than a minute had passed when he opened his eyes with a slight gasp. He looked utterly stricken. "I can't feel . . .

anything. It's like it's . . . disappeared." Wincing he shut his eyes again and drew in heavy breaths.

"It's the same with me," Mia said. "I can't feel my Psynergy. So I . . . I can't heal you, Isaac."

"Don't worry about it. I'm . . . I'm okay."

"No you *aren't*." She realized something then. "Your pack is missing. I'm going to go look for it. You stay here." She wasn't sure if he heard her, as he was staring off to the side again with a hand pressed to his chest. Frowning, she started out to look for his pack. It was rare for them to have injuries as bad as Isaac's, especially since they usually healed with Psynergy right away. She was worried about him. Even though he was obviously hiding it from her, Isaac was in a lot of pain. If it hurt him to breathe, she knew it was bad.

Suddenly, she came across his pack. It was lying under a bush not far from the edge of the clearing. Grateful for this small mercy, she picked it up and swung it over her shoulder. Isaac wasn't in the right state to be carrying anything.

Walking back over to him, Mia's thoughts returned to Ivan and Garet. "Well, I found your pack," she said, stopping next to him but remaining on her feet. "I suppose we have to figure out what to do now." Isaac snapped his head up and looked at her.

"What . . . do you mean?" She stared at him, wondering at his incredulous tone. "We've got to go find . . . Garet and Ivan."

"Yes I know, but . . ."

"You . . . you don't understand. I have . . . to find them." He was getting agitated and upset, which definitely wasn't a good thing for him with broken ribs.

"Isaac," Mia started, but she was cut off.

"I'll do it myself . . . then." And to her dismay, he moved his hands back to grip onto the tree and started to push himself up. She could only watch as he slowly pulled himself onto his feet, using the tree trunk to brace against. Finally standing, Isaac didn't let go of the tree. His face was drained of colour and he was shaking from the effort.

Feeling a sad kind of compassion for him, Mia stepped forward. "No, Isaac, stop," she pleaded softly. She placed both hands on his shoulders and pushed him back gently to lean against the tree. He didn't protest, and kept shivering under her grip. "I know you don't like to admit it, to me or to yourself but . . . you're *hurt*, Isaac." He looked away from her. "Ivan and Garet are important to me too. But we can't do anything for them right now. We need to find a place to set up camp for tonight. I have to try and see if I can help you at all, without Psynergy. Okay?"

She turned around so that she was next to him, not waiting for an answer she was sure wouldn't come. Taking his right arm, she pulled it over her shoulders and grasped his hand with hers. She moved her other arm down and slid it around his waist. Taking a step forward, she gently pulled Isaac away from the tree. Then she stood still for a moment. "Okay?" she implored again.

For a few moments he seemed to be resisting her, not accepting the help she was offering. But then he slumped into her slightly. Head down, she almost didn't catch what he said next.

"Thank you," he murmured. She squeezed his hand a bit.

"Don't worry about it."

~*~

They had walked for a long time. The forest they traveled through seemed to stretch for miles around, as they hadn't found a break in the greenery yet. No signs of human life pervaded the natural atmosphere. Nor was there any evidence that a person, or two people, had been there.

Glancing up through the trees as she walked, Mia noticed the sunlight growing orange. She saw this with growing concern. Isaac stumbled suddenly, but she kept a tight grip on him and he didn't fall. She didn't comment on the stifled yelp he made. She heard it though.

They had to set up camp soon. Asides from the fact that it would be dark within the hour, there was Isaac to be concerned with. Starting out, he had been able to walk fairly well, all things considered, using her only for support. A few hours later she had noticed that he was favouring his left leg. But he didn't say anything, so she hadn't either. Now though, she had to seriously worry about the toll it was taking on him. He was limping badly; he was more and more dependant on her and leaning heavily on her shoulder; his breathing was ragged and painful, hitching every so often. And Mia was certain he'd never tell her about any of these things. But even he couldn't hide the odd groan and cry that escaped him, no matter how small.

This has to stop. He can't go on like this, and I'm getting tired as well. Just as she thought this she noticed a break in the trees ahead. Trying not to get her hopes up, Mia kept up her pace towards the spot. She urged Isaac to keep going

with a squeeze of his hand, but she could tell he was spiraling rapidly.

They reached the trees and Mia looked through with immense relief. It was by no means the edge of the forest; this was merely another clearing much like the one she had found Isaac in. It was enough. There was even a log stranded in the middle of the grassy space. Half-staggering into the clearing, she led Isaac over to the log. She slid his arm off her shoulder, and luckily he was clear-headed enough to realize what she was doing, and let himself be lowered onto the log to sit gasping. Finally relieved of his weight Mia was able to stretch out her arms and tried to work out the aches in her shoulders. Halfway through though, she felt guilty all of a sudden to be worrying about her pitiful problems. She turned to Isaac.

"Do you feel all right?" A nod was all he seemed capable of as he panted. He was clutching his side again, but that was to be expected. There was something else on her mind though. "Liar," she murmured, and then kept talking when she saw him tense. "Show me your right leg." Isaac glanced up at her and, seeing her resolute face, extended his leg with a sharp intake of breath. Dumping both his bag, her own and her staff onto the ground, Mia crouched down and pushed up his pant leg. She grimaced at the sight of a livid bruise above the ankle. Carefully she reached out and pressed the center of it with her forefinger. The feeling of the bone underneath the skin and the strangled sound Isaac made were enough to confirm what she had feared. "Another fracture." She gave him a hard look. "Why didn't you tell me?"

A bizarre mix of emotions flashed across his face. "I didn't . . . didn't know . . . about it. Not . . . until I . . . I started walking."

"We were walking for hours. Why didn't you say something when you started to limp? Don't think for a minute that I didn't notice."

"Because . . . because . . ." His voice faded and he looked away from her. He wasn't going to explain to her, for whatever reason. *Perhaps he doesn't know how to explain himself.* Her exasperation left her quickly and was replaced with steadfast healer instincts. She stood up abruptly and went over to the closest tree. Looking on the ground, she found the sturdiest fallen branches she could and picked them up. When she stood again she could see Isaac watching her from the other side of the clearing. She called out to him.

"I'm going to have to splint your leg." Carrying the sticks back over, she dropped them on the ground and started rummaging through her bag. Once she'd found the bandages she needed Mia turned to Isaac and set to work on his leg. "A lot of my potions went missing," she started saying, partly for Isaac's sake and partly for her own. "I've only got a few left, so I'll have to find more herbs and plants to make them with." She glanced up at him, then back to her hand holding a stick in place. "There aren't any restoring potions. We used most of those at Venus Lighthouse. I've got a couple of small pain-numbing mixes . . . but I think it would be best if we saved those for the daytime." Pausing, she added, "I'm sorry."

"Why?" came Isaac's quiet voice from above her. Mia looked up at his now impassive face, only his eyes betraying the hurt he still felt. She turned back to the binding.

"Because I can't give you the potions. I want to; but we have to be careful of them." Silence but for the calls of a bird.
"And because I can't really help you. At all." She sat back

from the fully bandaged splint. A touch on her forehead startled her and she looked up to find him reaching out with a hand. A strange expression somewhere between worry and guilt was on his face.

"You have a . . . wound." Realizing what he meant she flung her hand up to where he was pointing.

"Oh that. That's just a cut, don't worry about it. Now," she stood up. "I don't think we should light a fire, considering we don't know what could find us out here. So we'll just have to eat some bread for dinner. We should do that now, before it gets really dark."

The sun was indeed on the verge of setting, with the dappled light drifting through the trees becoming a darker shade of vermilion. Under the fading light the pair sat side by side on the log and ate their meager meal. Silence pervaded the air around them as neither spoke a word.

Holding the last piece of dry bread in her hands, Mia wondered for the thousandth time where Gareth and Ivan were. It was fine to hope they were alive and well somewhere nearby, but pessimistic realism kept sneaking into her mind. It was just as likely that they were hurt like Isaac. *I hope they're together though. It's bad enough to imagine them injured, but if they were on their own and hurt . . .* She looked over at Isaac, sitting on the log with shoulders curved in and head hung low. *They wouldn't be able to make it far if it were as bad as Isaac. Or worse.* She refused point blank to consider the other end of the scale.

She took the last mouthful of her bread without much thought. Through the grey light that came with twilight, she could still see Isaac. She noticed that he kept blinking and had a bleary look in his eyes again. It was then that she

realized just how tired she was. A wave of exhaustion seemed to hit her all at once, and it was all she could do to keep from falling asleep on the spot. Getting up from the log she went over to where her and Isaac's bags were, and dug out the blankets from both. When she brought them back she was partially distressed to find Isaac standing unsteadily on his feet waiting for her. She bit back a protest though, and merely handed him his blankets. It would be no good arguing with him; stubbornness ran deep with Isaac.

Mia set about stowing their packs, her staff and Isaac's sword away in a relatively safe place beneath a tree trunk. It needed to be done, yes, but mainly she was doing it to give him some time to organize his blankets. Given his injuries, it would take longer than usual. Finally she was done, and went to throw down her own blankets nearby.

Sighing, she lay down under a single blanket, not having bothered to remove anything but her shoes. A few stars shone through gaps in the trees above, reminding her that wherever they were, it was still under the same sky.

"Mia," came Isaac's faint voice, somewhere to her left. She twisted to face him, thought neither could see the other.

"Isaac?" There was a long silent pause between them. The hissing of wind between the trees flared and died.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

She didn't know what he was apologizing for. It could have been the injuries, for allowing himself to be hurt. For having been so dependant on her all day. For being stubborn, for lying about his wounds. For not knowing where Gareth and Ivan were. But, she didn't care. All she knew was that he had admitted something to himself, and needed to apologize to her.

"Don't be," she said after a time. "It's not your fault." She thought she heard him sigh, but it may have been the breeze.

It may have been an hour, or a minute later, that she fell asleep at last.

I won't make any promises this time about when the next one is coming. But I'll do my best. Arigatou.

- Vappa